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When Blizzards Blow

The snow lies thick around us
In the dark and gloomy night,
The cold blizzard wails above us,
And the stars withhold their light.

The pioneers looked forward with genuine concern to the long winter months. Distances to mill, store, or postoffice were long and the means of transportation were cumbersome and slow. The bleak Iowa prairies afforded no protection from the raging blizzards that swept across the wilderness between the Mississippi and the Missouri, burying fences, cattle sheds, and log cabins, and obliterating the ordinary landmarks that served as guides for the early settlers. Tales of untold suffering have been handed down by those luckless Iowans unfortunate enough to be caught in a blizzard on the thinly populated prairies. The hardships endured by many of these frontiersmen left an indelible impression on their minds which the passing of years did not erase from their memories.

Each generation is inclined to regard the cold weather of its youth as the worst ever experienced. "Never, during our residence in the mines", de-

clared the Dubuque *Miner's Express* of November 17, 1842, "have we witnessed so terrible a snow storm as that with which our city was visited on yesterday. . . . We heard old bachelors complaining bitterly of cold lodgings. Poor fellows — we did not feel surprised at hearing them complain — for it was bitter cold."

The month of November, 1842, actually ushered in what Theodore S. Parvin described as the "long winter" in Iowa history. During this period residents of Muscatine enjoyed "continued and uninterrupted" sleighing for 126 days beginning with November 26th. The Mississippi River was closed for 134 days at Muscatine and 147 days at Le Claire. Forty years later, in 1882, Parvin wrote: "We have had other winters with a lower mean temperature and with lower temperature, (as low as 30° below zero), lower daily temperature and more days of extremely low temperature, but none of such long continuance as that famous winter of cold, prolonged cold, of ice and snow, through a longer period than ever before or since."

It was on December 17th of this "long winter" that five Delaware County pioneers set out from Bailey's Ford to drive hogs through the deep snow to Fort Atkinson. On their return they were caught in a blizzard on the Little Turkey River on January 1, 1843. Unable to light a fire,

ravenously hungry, exhausted from struggling through the deep snow all day, sleep was sorely tempting, but sleep meant death. They wrapped their blankets around them and stood huddled together, stamping to keep up the circulation in their feet and talking steadily to prevent any one from falling to sleep undiscovered in the darkness. The following night they reached Beatty's cabin after struggling through the snow all day. They were almost past caring whether they lived or died. One man was laid up several weeks; another could not walk for three months; a third lost eight toes and was a cripple for life.

The sufferings of Inkpaduta and his Sioux Indians during the bitter winter of 1856-57 have been described as an important factor in precipitating the Spirit Lake Massacre. The white settlers likewise endured great privations that winter. As late as 1893 William Larrabee asserted the "unusually severe" winter of 1856-57 was never equalled in the memory of most Iowans. "Snow fell to an enormous depth, and the mercury not infrequently ranged from 20° to 40° below zero for several days in succession." Larrabee recalled "a series of great storms — now called blizzards" which swept the prairies, "whirling the dust of the powdery snow in a wild dance and piling up large banks wherever natural or artificial

obstacles interrupted their turbulent course. During that long severe winter nearly all the deer in northern Iowa were destroyed, some freezing, others starving to death, still others getting fast in the deep, crust-covered snow, and being killed by the merciless settlers while in this helpless condition. Few of the frontier people were prepared for such a winter, and certainly none had anticipated it. Thousands suffered for want of sufficient clothing and fuel, and many a man, overtaken by a blinding storm, or tired out wading through the deep snow, froze to death on the prairie, perhaps only a stone's throw from home." Larrabee himself almost met a similar fate.

It was during this same bitter winter, on December 28, 1856, that Reuben and David Williams were caught in a severe snow storm while watering cattle in Willow Creek, which flowed through the bleak prairie lands of Cerro Gordo County. Through a bitter cold night eighteen-year-old Reuben fought stubbornly to keep his younger brother moving and awake. At sunrise Reuben found they had wandered to within hailing distance of one of the cabins in Masonic Grove (now Mason City). "I was brought back to a drowsy consciousness," David Williams recalled, "by being pulled out of the snow by Reuben. The air was so cold it seemed fairly

blue, and its cutting bitterness struck into my flesh like steel . . . I tried to walk, but my feet were dead. As if wooden, my benumbed body refused to respond to a still more feeble will. Reuben's efforts to get me towards the house were fruitless. The last I recall was hearing him shout to some one. When I came to I was in bed."

A Black Hawk County pioneer recalled that there was snow on the ground when the family moved into their new farmhouse on November 27, 1856. The first snow had fallen before the corn was gathered, and it had to be left in the field all winter. December 1st dawned bright and clear but by night a fierce blizzard was blowing which lasted three days. One Sunday a short time later a small group gathered for religious services at the schoolhouse. It was found that there was not enough wood so services were adjourned to the Nelson Fancher house, about a quarter of a mile away. "In a little while a heavy snow began to fall and the wind blew a gale", according to Mrs. Fancher. "A few near neighbors went home, but the rest waited for the storm to abate. The minister, John Kirkpatrick, ate some lunch and started home. Instead of taking the road, he went through the river timber until he reached a spot in the woods which he knew was directly opposite his farmhouse, a short dis-

tance away. With the aid of a pocket compass he reached his home, but was badly frozen.

"About 3 o'clock in the afternoon the storm reached its climax. The air looked blue and there was a humming sound. Two peddlers drove up, and we took them in, as it was sure death to go on.

"We had thirty-two guests that night. I found beds for all the women, but the men had to bring in their buffalo robes and sleep on the floor in front of the fireplace. Ropes were stretched to the barn so the men could find their way back after feeding the stock. After the storm passed it was intensely cold. I remember we had to cut the ham for breakfast with an ax."

The pioneers were quick to challenge anyone who claimed that a certain winter was the coldest, the longest, or the snowiest. When William Larabee's description of the winter of 1856-57 was printed in the *Des Moines Register* in 1909, Sumner Smith of Melrose admitted it was a "bad one" but contended that the "worst and coldest storm" took place on December 31, 1863, and January 1, 1864, the latter date being the "coldest day" he had ever known since his arrival in Iowa on April 25, 1838. The second worst storm, Smith thought, occurred on January 13, 1855. Many old-time Winfield residents, Smith believed,

would remember "how we used to drive heavy loads over the fences, after that storm."

Although his records were incomplete, Charles D. Reed, former chief of the United States Weather Bureau at Des Moines, thought that December 31, 1863 and January 1, 1864, might possibly mark the date of the "great blizzard" in eastern Iowa, while January 12, 1888, was probably the date of the worst blizzard in western Iowa. Newspaper reports clearly indicate that the great blizzard of 1864 took a firm grip on the entire eastern half of Iowa. A Des Moines dispatch dated January 1st read: "Whew! old Boreas is rampant today, and is blowing in the new year in a rage, and with a frosty touch that bids beware to noses and toeses." The editor thought he would rather risk his life "in front of rebels, with a chance of one to four" than to brave the terrors of driving a stagecoach over the snow-blanketed, windswept prairies of Iowa.

The *Muscatine Courier* asserted that many would long remember the "big storm" of January 1, 1864, which the "oldest inhabitant" believed was the most severe one ever to visit Muscatine County. The first of January was such a "snapping cold day" that New Year's calls were at a low ebb. The roads into the country were blocked and few people came into town, except by foot.

Railroad tracks were blockaded, trains late, and no mail was received or forwarded. "We hear of a large number of persons who had limbs frozen," the *Courier* reported, "and almost everybody on the prairies had some of their stock frozen to death. Buyers of hogs found their droves freezing on their hands, and it did not help the matter any to load the cars with them, for cars were 'no go'." In one instance, out of a flock of 400 sheep, 300 perished in the storm.

At Iowa City, Theodore S. Parvin recorded that the "most violent snowstorm known in this region" commenced on January 1st. The temperature stood at -26° at 7 A. M. and it did not rise above zero until January 7th. The *Iowa City Republican* of January 6, 1864, declared the weather was not ordinarily a proper subject of editorial discussion, but apparently the first of January, 1864, was an exception. Old Boreas stood in the streets of Iowa City shaking whirlwinds of snow from his garments as if intent on destroying the town. "It was deposited on your hat and under your hat; in the front of your neck and the back of your neck; in your pockets and in your boots. It blew down your chimney and up your cellar way; through your cornice and beneath your shingles. It covered your pig-sty, buried your wood-pile, obstructed your gate-way

and barricaded your side-walk. And the little boys, on their little sleds, say they never saw 'such a crackin' big snow'. . . . Railroad men are digging away to get the mails through, and we are scribbling away to fill our columns up. Charge this gust of words to the gust of snow."

There were many cold winters and many heavy snowfalls between 1864 and 1888 — the year the "great blizzard" struck western Iowa. Late in January, 1867, the *Oskaloosa Herald* recorded a snowfall of from twelve to fourteen inches. A pioneer of Montgomery County thought the winter of 1866-67 was the coldest he had ever experienced. A Decatur County pioneer declared that the snowdrifts were up to the eaves of log cabins that year. "After the snowfall the weather turned colder and the snow froze hard. We could drive in any direction across the prairie over high fences. We had just put out a washing before the snow and it was six weeks before we were enabled to find it all. Heavy snows were common, but this one was the heaviest I ever saw."

So wary had many Iowans become of the sudden frigid blasts that swept the State that newspapers frequently carried forecasts by local weather prophets or printed accounts that might enable farmers to foretell the approach of a hard winter. On November 8, 1867, the *Oskaloosa*

Herald chronicled the following sure signs of a hard winter. "Hives are said to be overflowing with honey; the husks of corn are declared to be of extra thickness, and the furs of animals are pronounced exceedingly rich and heavy. It is observed, too, that the rats are traveling eastwardly in great numbers, and the squirrels are making arrangements on an increased scale for the storage of nuts."

Out of the harrowing experiences of the Iowa pioneers was coined the word blizzard, a word now best defined to mean a sudden and violent storm of fine driving snow accompanied by intense cold. The word blizzard itself was not new, for it had been used as early as 1829 to denote a "sharp blow, or a shot, or volley of shots". Its use to describe fierce winter snowstorms seems to have originated in Iowa, though blizzards are more common farther northwest. Apparently the term was first used in this sense by the editor of the *Estherville Northern Vindicator* when he noted on April 23, 1870, that a pioneer had had "too much experience with northwestern 'blizzards' [sic] to be caught in such a trap." The following week the editor used the accepted spelling when he recorded that the "unfortunate victim of the March 'blizzard' . . . is rapidly improving."

The word "blizzard" quickly became popular

among Iowa editors. On January 11, 1873, the *Sioux City Weekly Times* referred to a "blizzard" or "customary annual winter storm" that had broken out in Woodbury County on Tuesday morning. "During the day the wind blew a gale," the editor declared. "The snow was almost blinding, and the thermometer indicated stiff freezing air." On March 9, 1874, the *Dubuque Telegraph* noted that a local gentleman had been hooted for predicting a blizzard. On December 3, 1876, the editor of the *Wright County Monitor* at Clarion wrote: "A genuine blizzard set on its hind legs and howled for twelve or fourteen hours while the mercury lurked at from ten to fourteen degrees below zero."

Both the weather bureau and the pioneers recognize the big blizzard of 1888 as one of the worst. Although it caught many Iowans unprepared, readers of the daily newspapers had ample warning of its approach. Early in January the temperature fell to 50° below zero in northern Minnesota. A dispatch from Bismarck on January 13th was hopeful that the fury of the "terrible blizzard" had been spent, but expected that the railroad tracks would not be cleared for several days.

In the path of this "deadly blizzard" stood Rock Rapids in the northwesternmost county in

Iowa. The *Lyon County Reporter* of January 6, 1888, had quoted a Rock Island weather prophet as forecasting that January would "average equal to or above the mean of the season." A week later the *Reporter* gave the following account of the "worst blizzard" in several years: "The storm began here about five o'clock in the afternoon and raged with unabated violence until morning. The temperature was fully thirty degrees below zero and the wind blowing a perfect hurricane made it impossible for those who were out to distinguish objects at a distance of fifty feet. The snow was very fine and dry and blew into every crevice while the piercing cold seemed to penetrate the most solid buildings."

A Greenfield editor recorded that the "snow, fine as powder, was hurled along by the gale. On the prairie an object forty feet distant could not be seen. A man's voice could not be heard six feet distant." The snow darkened the sky, creating the "most dismal, drear, and forsaken" scene that man had ever looked upon. At Eagle Grove the *Boone Valley Gazette* of January 19th declared the blizzard "surpassed in violence anything we have ever seen in this climate. Friday morning the storm still raged with the mercury 22° below zero."

The great blizzard of 1888 was notable for the

loss of human life, especially among children who were caught returning from school in the afternoon. A few miles north of Rock Rapids, for example, the two Cushman boys were on their way home when one "separated from the other and was obliged to pass the night in a cornfield." Though he was found in the morning he was badly frozen and it was feared that he could not survive. Thirty-four years later, the *Rock Rapids Review*, commenting on the "big blizzard", remarked that the person who had most reason to remember the storm was Tommie Cushman, rural mail carrier, who lost his hands as a result of being frozen. The *Review* also noted that it was necessary to amputate both the hands and feet of John Langfeldt, an operation which attracted widespread attention in the medical world.

There were stories of heroism and devotion. Near Archer a brother and two sisters were caught in the blizzard of 1888. When the girls were unable to go farther the brother took off his coat and told them to stay there while he went on for help. The brother himself became lost and was badly frozen. The bodies of the two girls were found just where the brother had left them. Conductor Charles Gustafson was "terribly frozen" while he went back up the track with his lantern to stand guard and flag a train which

would have run into his own that had been blocked by a snowdrift. Mrs. Temple at Paulina sent her little boy across the street on an errand, not realizing what a violent storm was raging. Thoroughly frightened by the power of the wind and the cutting snow, the boy cried for help, and fortunately his mother heard. But when she dashed out unprotected the wind carried her in the wrong direction and before she could rescue the boy her face and arms were severely frozen.

Pat Quigley, who married an Irish lass on January 12, 1888, was returning to his homestead with his bride after dinner, when he was caught in the blizzard. "Pat had an excellent team, a double wagon box, a lot of wedding presents, among them a cake and a jug of wine, a lot of bed clothing and robes. With terrific suddenness the storm began. He faced the storm and drove steadily onward until the horses refused to go farther. So Pat unhitched them and turned the double box over himself and bride. . . . The couple ate the cake and drank the wine — spent that night, all the next day and the next night under that wagon box and when Pat tried to turn the box over — and he was a brawny Irish lad, he couldn't budge the thing. It was snowed under and he had to call upon his newly wedded wife to help him." After much effort they managed to

crawl out. The storm was over. And Pat found he was just twenty feet from his stable!

In the half century between the creation of the Territory of Iowa and the frigid winter of 1888, almost two million people had settled in Iowa and railroads crossed the State in all directions. Groves of trees had been planted on many farms and neighbors were of necessity much nearer than in former years. Nevertheless, death still stalked the Iowa prairies whenever a mid-winter blizzard howled through town and countryside.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN